

THE BUNYIP MYSTERY

The large aquatic animals seen in Australia's inland water systems by Aborigines and European pioneers may have been remnant megafauna from Pleistocene times.

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EARLY SIGHTINGS IN VICTORIA

During a very hot January in 1982 I was staying with a friend, Lee Kelly, his mother, Heather, and his grandmother at their farm at Macarthur near the Eumeralla River in western Victoria. Lee's grandmother had spent much of her life on the farm and while reminiscing about life on the land mentioned the bunyip that once lived on the property. It inhabited a large swamp that was connected to the Eumeralla River during times of flood.

She had never actually observed the animal itself and did not even regard it as anything particularly unusual, for she had long grown accustomed to its strange roaring call at night—until the swamp was eventually drained and turned into pasture. I asked her if she had ever seen a brown bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*), a secretive, solitary bird with streaky variegated brown and buff plumage that enables it to hide and nest in the dense cumbungi reed beds. I told her that it has a voice like a deep, distant foghorn and has a double "woomph-woomph" call. She replied that she had not observed or even heard of such a bird and did not believe that it was the call that she was once familiar with. She knew only of the creature's haunting roaring call and that it was known as a "bunyip".

Sixty-three kilometres north of Macarthur I stayed overnight at the historic Bunyip Hotel in the town of Cavendish. I asked the publican how the hotel had received its name and he replied that it had been named after an animal that once lived in the nearby Dundas River, though he had no idea what the animal looked like.

Some time afterwards I discovered that the respected Australian Museum scientist Gilbert Whitley had written an article, published in the *Australian Museum Magazine* in March 1940, entitled "Mystery Animals of Australia",¹ in which he noted that a large brown animal with a kangaroo-like head, a large mouth and an elongated neck with a long shaggy mane had been reported in 1848 to live in the Eumeralla River near Port Fairy.

An early settler, Mr I. Best, and his son were recorded as having observed in the Merri River near Warrnambool in either 1844 or 1845 a large black hairy animal 10 feet (3 metres) long, which Best believed to feed on the "rank herbage" by the river and which made a terrible noise at night in the swamps, "enough to frighten the strongest nerves, similar to a bullock having a dreadful cough".

Whitley further recorded similar descriptions by the Aboriginal people of the Port Phillip district of an aquatic animal with a body that varied from the size of a calf up to a bullock. It had an elongated neck and head, resembling an emu, with a mane like a horse, flippers like a seal and a horse-like tail, and they knew it as the *tunatpan*.

The first European known to have lived in Victoria was the convict William Buckley, who escaped from the earliest settlement under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Collins in 1803. Buckley was a stonemason turned soldier who was apparently falsely arrested during an army uprising. After his escape, the settlement was abandoned and he lived for 32 years with the Wothowurong Aboriginal people in the Geelong area until the next attempt by Europeans to settle Victoria in 1835. He guided the first settlers around the district, described the cultural life of the tribal peoples that inhabited the land and gave information on the plants and animals. He also described his attempts to identify the large unknown aquatic animals that he often observed:²

"...in this lake [Modewarre] as well as in most of the others inland, and in the deep-water rivers [including the Barwon], is a very extraordinary amphibious

animal, which the natives call Bun-yip, of which I could never see any part except the back, which appeared to be covered with feathers of a dusky-grey colour. It seemed to be about the size of a full-grown calf, and sometimes larger. The creatures only appear when the weather is very calm and the water smooth. I could never learn from any of the natives that they had seen either the head or tail, so that I could not form a correct idea of their size, or what they were like. When alone I several times attempted to spear a Bun-yip; but had the natives seen me do so it would have caused great displeasure. And again, had I succeeded in killing, or even wounding one, my own life would probably have paid the forfeit; they considering the animal something supernatural."

The Wergaia language people who inhabited the northwestern portion of Victoria, bounded by Dimboola, Lake Albacutya, Yanac and Warracknabeal, knew of two different kinds of bunyip. One species they called a *banib* (pronounced "bunnip"), which resembled a large black pig and lived in Lake Hindmarsh; while a second species was named *banip-ba-gunuwar* ("bunyip and swan"), which was also large and dark but with an elongated neck, and lived in Lake Albacutya.³

Charles La Trobe, first Governor of the Port Phillip district, began receiving reports of large aquatic animals from settlers as they spread out over the new frontier. From the descriptions of both Europeans and Aborigines, he also began to believe that there were two species of bunyip. In 1847 he wrote of a northern and a southern species and managed to procure Aboriginal drawings of each, which were subsequently lost.⁴

However, further drawings of the two species by Aboriginal artists have come down to us in Brough Smyth's *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878).⁵ One of these drawings was the work of an unnamed Murray River Aborigine in 1848 and depicts the pig-like *banib*. The other drawing was the work of Kurruk, under the direction of a tribal elder of the people of Western Port, and depicts the second bunyip species, described as having a head and neck like an emu and known in their language as a *too-roo-don*. This type of bunyip was said to have four legs, each with three emu-like webbed toes, though the drawing has only two emu-like legs.

EARLY SIGHTINGS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Further north in New South Wales, explorers and settlers were also reporting their sightings of large, unknown, aquatic animals.

On 5 April 1818, explorers Hamilton Hume and James Meehan found skulls and bones on the edge of Lake Bathurst, 40 kilometres south of the present city of Goulburn, which they believed came from an animal that they thought may have been a native hippopotamus or perhaps a freshwater dugong. The Philosophical Society of Australasia offered to reimburse Hume for any expenses incurred if he would return to the lake to obtain a specimen.⁶

In a letter to the *Sydney Gazette* of 27 March 1823, a new

settler, E. S. Hall, who later became Coroner and founder of the Bank of New South Wales, stated that in November 1821 in Lake Bathurst, a small body of water surrounded by a much larger area of reed beds, he heard and saw an aquatic animal:⁷

"One fine morning in November 1821, I was walking by the side of the marsh which runs into Lake Bathurst, when my attention was attracted by a creature casting up the water and making a noise, in sound resembling a porpoise, but shorter and louder: the head only was out of the water. At the distance I stood it had the appearance of a bull-dog's head, but perfectly black; the head floated about as though the animal was recreating itself; it cut up the water behind, but the quantity thrown up evinced neither strength nor bulk; it remained about five minutes, and then disappeared. I saw it at a greater distance afterwards, when it wore the same appearance."

He went on to describe how his overseer had shot one at daybreak after it rose from the water and lay at full length, measuring 1.5 metres long, on the reeds and it then rolled over and disappeared. Other sightings of the animal were consequently made, but no shots were fired. However, he obtained another good view of the animal in the summer of the following year:⁸

"In December last, Mr Forbes and I were bathing at the eastern end of the lake, where an arm runs among the honeysuckles. As I was dressing, a creature, at a distance of about 130 or 150 yards [117 to 135 metres], suddenly presented itself to my view; it had risen out of the water before I perceived it, and was then gliding on the smooth surface with the rapidity of a whale-boat, as it appeared to me at the time. Its neck was long, apparently about three feet [0.9 metre] out of the water, and about the thickness of a man's thigh; the colour a jet black; the head was rather smaller in circumference than the neck and appeared surrounded by black flaps which

seemed to hang down, and gave it a most novel and striking appearance. The body was not to be seen; but, from the rippling of the water, I judged it to be longer than the neck. After it had continued for 300 yards [274 m], I turned to ascertain if Mr Forbes had also seen it, and on looking again it had dived and was seen no more."

Further sightings of this long-necked species were reported from New South Wales by the explorer William Hovell in his travels along the Murrumbidgee River. He was told by the different tribes of Aboriginal people he encountered of an aquatic animal that they referred to as *katempai*, *kinepratia* and *tanatbah*, according to their different tribal languages.

Although their names for the animal were different, the descriptions were very similar. Each time it was described as being an aquatic animal with a body up to the size of a bullock, with an elongated neck and head resembling an emu, a mane that

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extended from the head to the shoulders, a horse-like tail, four legs and three flipper-like webbed toes on each foot.

Hovell must have been fascinated with the idea of an unknown species of large aquatic mammal and wrote an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald* that was published on 9 February 1847, entitled "The apocryphal animal of the interior of New South Wales".⁹

One such animal was subsequently said to have been killed by the Aboriginal people of the lower Murrumbidgee. A local settler, Athol T. Fletcher, heard about it, visited the site near Balranald and found a strange skull, with blood, membranes and ligaments still attached, that measured 23 centimetres in length. Although the top of the cranium, the front of the snout and the lower jaw were missing, having been chewed at by dingos, all the Aboriginal people to whom he showed the skull confirmed that it was in fact the skull of a *katempai* and that the missing front of the jaw would have supported two downward-projecting large tusks.

Fletcher showed the skull to William Hovell who then wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which on 19 February 1847 published his letter describing the discovery of a bunyip's skull. Fletcher then took the skull to Melbourne and showed it to Governor La Trobe, who described it as having a long bill-like snout, the forehead rising abruptly, the eyes placed very low, strong grinding teeth and a very large brain cavity. The anatomists Dr Hobson and Mr Greeves examined it, and then it was sent to the biologist Ronald Gunn in Launceston, Tasmania. Dr James Grant described it in the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science* (January 1847) as a young, possibly even foetal (stillborn or miscarried) bunyip and said that the arrangement of the head and teeth were unlike anything he was familiar with.

The skull was then returned to New South Wales and given to Sir Charles Nicholson, Speaker of the Legislative Council in Sydney, who handed it over to the naturalist William S. Macleay, who exhibited it in the Colonial Museum (now the Australian Museum) as the skull of a bunyip. Macleay eventually decided that it was actually the skull of a deformed colt and a drawing of it was sent to Sir Richard Owen, curator of the Hunterian Museum in London, who thought that it was a calf.¹⁰ The skull eventually disappeared, probably having been thrown out as nothing more than the remains of a domestic animal, even though various anatomists were unable to identify it as such.

However, a description of the living animal appeared in the Melbourne Argus on 29 June 1847, written by George Hobler, a settler at Nap Nap on the Murrumbidgee, to William Hovell. It described how in May 1847, near Oxley, a white man had observed what the Aboriginal people of that district called a *kinepratia* on a cattle station owned by Mr Tyson, situated 20

kilometres from the junction of the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers, at a time of extensive flooding:¹¹

"The Lachlan when flooded spreads its waters over an immense extent of lowland, covered with reeds, through which the water finds its way to the junction with the Murrumbidgee. There is on the edge of this large reed bed, about 12 miles from the junction, a cattle station, recently settled by a Mr Tyson: the river has been overflowing these reed beds for some months past.

"Well, some few weeks ago, an intelligent lad in Tyson's employ, who was in search of the milking cows on the edge, and just inside this reed bed, where there are occasional patches of good grass, came suddenly, in one of these openings, upon an animal grazing, which he thus describes: it was about as big as a six-month-old calf, of a dark brown colour, a long neck and long pointed head; it

had large ears, which it pricked up when it perceived him; had a thick mane of hair from the head down the neck, and two large tusks; he turned to run away, and this creature equally alarmed ran off too, and from the glances he took of it, he described it as having an awkward shambling gallop; the fore-quarters of the animal were very large in proportion to the hindquarters, and it had a large tail, but whether he compared it to a horse or a bullock I do not recollect; he took two men to the place next morning to look for its tracks, which they describe as broad and square, somewhat like the spread hand of a man would make in soft muddy ground. The lad had never heard of the *kinepratia*, and yet his descriptions in some

respects tally with that of aborigines, who pretend to have seen them, so that I am inclined to think there is one of these extraordinary animals still living within a few miles of me, and I cannot but entertain a hope of being some day fortunate enough to come in contact with one, and, if so, I shall do my best to bring him home with me.

"Captain Hovell, who communicates Mr Hobler's letter to the *Herald*, gives a similar description of another live specimen seen by a shepherd on the Murrumbidgee"

Following is that portion of the letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 16 June 1847 that included the shepherd's sighting:¹²

"While he was standing on the bank of the Murrumbidgee, he saw something (similar in appearance to the one mentioned in the accompanied letter) rise suddenly out of the middle of the stream, that it showed, as he supposes, about half of its figure, and that while in the act of shaking itself,



Emu-headed bunyip, illustrated by Sarah Stevens.
(Source: Josie Flett's book, *A History of Bunyips, Australia's Great Mystery Water Beasts*, Free Spirit Press, 1999)

it caught sight of him and instantly disappeared, but although the time could not have exceeded a few moments, he saw sufficient to enable him to describe it to me, and which nearly agrees with what I have been told by the Aborigines."

A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN BUNYIP

On 19 December 1853, the Melbourne *Argus* published an article entitled "The Bunyip of South Australia", which stated:¹³

"A gentleman writing from Rocky River, near Mount Remarkable, under date of 15th instant, says: 'About four nights ago I was camped close to a large and exceedingly deep waterhole here... I was startled by hearing a curious noise in the water. I jumped up and looked towards the place from which the noise seemed to proceed, and as the moon was very bright I was enabled to perceive a large blackish substance advancing towards the bank and which, as it approached, raised itself out of the water. I crept towards it, and perceived that it had a large head and a neck something like that of a horse, with thick bristly hair. I suppose it must have seen me for it proceeded down the river, keeping a few yards from the bank towards which it made again nearly abreast of my horse, which no sooner saw it than it made a rush, breaking the tether rope and bolting. The noise occasioned by the horse running away caused my strange visitor to disappear immediately, in consequence of which I had not an opportunity of examining it more minutely. From what I saw of it, however, I should think its entire length would be from fifteen to eighteen feet [4.5 to 5.5 metres]."

Different witnesses only rarely reported the long-necked species, whereas there were many sightings of the short-necked species which was described as pig-like, dog-like, seal-like and otter-like.

SIGHTINGS OF SEALS AND SEAL-LIKE BUNYIPS

This next article on the bunyip appeared in the *Moreton Bay Free Press* of 15 April 1857, describing the observations of Mr Stocqueler, a naturalist who was exploring the Murray and Goulburn rivers in NSW in early 1857 in a canvas boat:¹⁴

"Mr Stocqueler informs us that the bunyip is a large fresh-water seal, having two small paddles or fins attached to the shoulders, a long swan-like neck, a head like a dog, and a curious bag hanging under the jaw, resembling the pouch of a pelican. The animal is covered with hair like a platypus, and the colour is glossy black. Mr Stocqueler saw no less than six of the curious animals at different times; his boat was within thirty feet [9 m] of one, near McGuire's Point, on the Goulburn, and [he] fired at the bunyip, but did not succeed in capturing him. The smallest appeared to be about five feet [1.5 m] in length, and the largest exceeded fifteen feet [4.5 m]. The head of the largest was the size of a bullock's head and three feet out of the water."

He went on to state that he had observed them travelling at a speed of seven knots against the current and had drawn pictures of them, which he showed to local Aboriginal people who described the drawings as the "bunyip's brother"—perhaps meaning a

duplicate or likeness of the bunyip.

Most serious bunyip researchers have come to the conclusion that there were indeed two species of bunyip inhabiting the south-eastern portion of the continent ranging from South Australia up into southeastern Queensland. Different witnesses only rarely reported the long-necked species, whereas there were many sightings of the short-necked species which was described as pig-like, dog-like, seal-like and otter-like. The latter species was also regularly reported in Tasmania. These sightings may well have been of seals that had made their way up into rivers and lakes, for the descriptions are always of a seal-like character: glossy black fur, dog- or seal-like head and flippers.

In 1863, Charles Headlam and his son Anthony, while rowing on Great Lake in Tasmania, had a close encounter with the animal:¹⁵

"...my oar nearly came in contact with a large-looking beast about the size of a fully developed sheep dog...it appeared to have two small flappers, or wings, which it made good use of..."

Francis McPartland also observed these animals in Great Lake in 1868 and described three or four of them, dark in colour with round heads like a bulldog and 90 to 120 centimetres in length, swimming around in pairs with their heads and occasionally their shoulders above the surface of the water.¹⁶

Back on the mainland in New South Wales, the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* of April 1872 reported the observations of a dog-like bunyip known to the Aboriginal people as the *waa-wee* and seen many times in Midgeon Lagoon, 26 kilometres north of Narrandera:¹⁷

"The animal was about half as long again as an ordinary retriever dog, the hair all over its body black and shining, its coat was very long—the hair spreading out on the surface of the water for about five inches, and floating loosely as the creature rose and fell by its own motion. I could not detect any tail, and the hair about its head was too long and glossy to admit to my seeing its eyes; the ears were well marked."

One of the few descriptions of the seal-like bunyip observed out of the water was by Captain Sam Southwell, near Canberra in the late 1800s, who noted that its rear end had fins or flippers, as retold by John Gale, founder of the *Queanbeyan Age* newspaper:¹⁸

"He was riding along the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, somewhere above Cusack's Crossing, when he saw a strange animal of proportions akin to those of a three-month-old calf, basking on a sandbank on the water's edge. The clatter of his horse's hoofs on the stony ground beneath its feet disturbed the creature, which at once wriggled, rather than walked, into the deep water and disappeared. The rider, dismounting from his steed, descended afoot to the place where this strange animal had been basking, and examined closely its trail. This had the appearance of fins or flippers, and not of feet, visible to the water's very edge."

Pioneer and veteran cattleman T. Hall observed one of these animals at the junction of Swan Creek and Gap Creek on the

Darling Downs during the 1860s or 1870s:¹⁹

"From the first, the blackfellows of the 'Blucher' tribe were unanimous in their descriptions of the 'Mochel Mochel', which in a way corresponded with that of an otter, also that it was only to be found in and about deep permanent waterholes; further, that it was a very shy animal which required great cunning and stealth to get a glimpse of, owing to its quickness and alertness. I was told that it could both see and hear underwater. That was particularly the case as regards anything moving about the bank, in the vicinity of its home; further, that it could produce sounds under the water... I heard a piercing kind of a scream similar to that uttered by a female in terrible distress... Much to my surprise I saw an animal similar to a low-set sheep dog, the colour of a platypus, head and whiskers resembling an otter, passing from the shallow water over a strip of dry land to the deep water."

Seals were actually shot on a number of occasions, far up freshwater rivers. In 1850, Mr E. J. Dunn, director of the Geological Survey of Victoria, watched along with several

other people a group of seals swimming up the flooded Murrumbidgee River near Gundagai, 1,200 kilometres from the sea.²⁰ Also in 1850, a seal was shot, and it was mounted and displayed for many years in the Carnago Hotel in New South Wales, 1,500 kilometres from the sea and well away from the main watercourses. In 1859, a three-metre-long leopard seal with a platypus in its belly was taken in the Shoalhaven River. Mr R. E. Day, chairman of the South Australian Pastoral Board, saw and identified a seal 400 kilometres up the Murray River at Overland Corner in 1890.

In the early 1930s, a seal was stranded in a lagoon in the riverine swamps of the Murray River between Renmark and Loxton, 500 kilometres from the sea.²¹ A Canberra fishing writer, John Turnbull, reported that a seal had been shot near Deniliquin in 1951.²²

The building of dams and other artificial obstructions may well have put an end to stray seals venturing far up our waterways and then being reported as bunyips. However, sightings of large and mysterious water creatures continued up until late into the 20th century in some localities. The Bunyip of Lismore in far northeastern NSW was frequently observed in a large lagoon as late as 1971, feeding on waterfowl. It was described as very seal-like, with a dog-like head with small ears.²³

QUEENSLAND ENCOUNTERS

Further north across the border in the Gold Coast hinterland in southeastern Queensland, the 800 hectares of lagoons and swamps stretching from Mudgeeraba to Burleigh Heads had a very long tradition of bunyips.

In 1887, Carl Lenz searched the swamps for two bunyips that he regularly heard calling half a mile apart. He also gathered reports from other settlers of encounters with bunyips. Mat Heeb was duck-shooting on the Nerang River in 1886 and observed an animal with a very large rough mane and a long bushy tail that dived into water weeds at the edge of a lagoon. Joe Daly also encountered a bunyip that year when he was camped beside Merrymac Swamp and described an animal that "had a big, ugly draffhorse's head, rough mane and coat and a powerful voice, part bark, part grunt and part roar". Lenz also described how a friend, Lionel Brown, came face to face with a bunyip on the land. He described it as a four-legged animal with a big ugly head, a big

He described it as a four-legged animal with a big ugly head, a big mouth full of sharp teeth, a shaggy mane, a rough coat and an enormous rough long bushy tail.

mouth full of sharp teeth, a shaggy mane, a rough coat and an enormous rough long bushy tail. It opened its mouth and snarled at him and, of course, he turned and ran for his life. His sister Faith took their father's military Marting rifle and fired at it from the road the next day. It dived and was not seen again. Lenz eventually saw a saltwater crocodile in these wetlands and believed that it was responsible for the bunyip stories.²⁴

Another bunyip was observed on the Nerang-Carrara Road during flooding around about 1903. This

was one of the long-necked, horse-like bunyips, a shy creature that dived back into the Nerang River when it was disturbed. In 1925, Mrs Valmai Natlock heard two bunyips calling from the swamps almost every night behind Burleigh. In 1965 at Gilston, neighbouring dairy farmers Tommy Hinde and Billy Hill both heard barking, roaring calls and found the nearby river churned up with mud splashed high up the riverbanks. A woman reported that she had seen a shaggy black-haired animal attack a dog in the river and throw it out of the water.²⁵

Perhaps the final appearance of the bunyip in southeast Queensland was in August 1986 when a group of teenagers camping in swampland adjacent to Currumbin Creek fled in terror from



Palorchestes azael, illustrated by Peter Schouten.
(Source: *Prehistoric Animals of Australia*, Australian Museum, Sydney, 1983)

a bear-like animal with a high-pitched scream. The *Gold Coast Bulletin* published a clear photo of the tracks that measured 5 cm by 5 cm and a description of the animal by two of the witnesses, Jason Turner and Grant Thrower, then aged fifteen. "There is no way it was a wild dog. It was really weird and had a high-pitched scream. It looked like a small bear, moved on all fours and had a hump on its back," said Grant Thrower.

"We have been coming here to this area for about a year and a half and I have never seen anything like this," added Jason Turner. "After fleeing the camp and boarding the boat, I shone the torch and saw two big orange eyes. I guess the creature was one metre high and a metre wide. It terrified us."²⁶

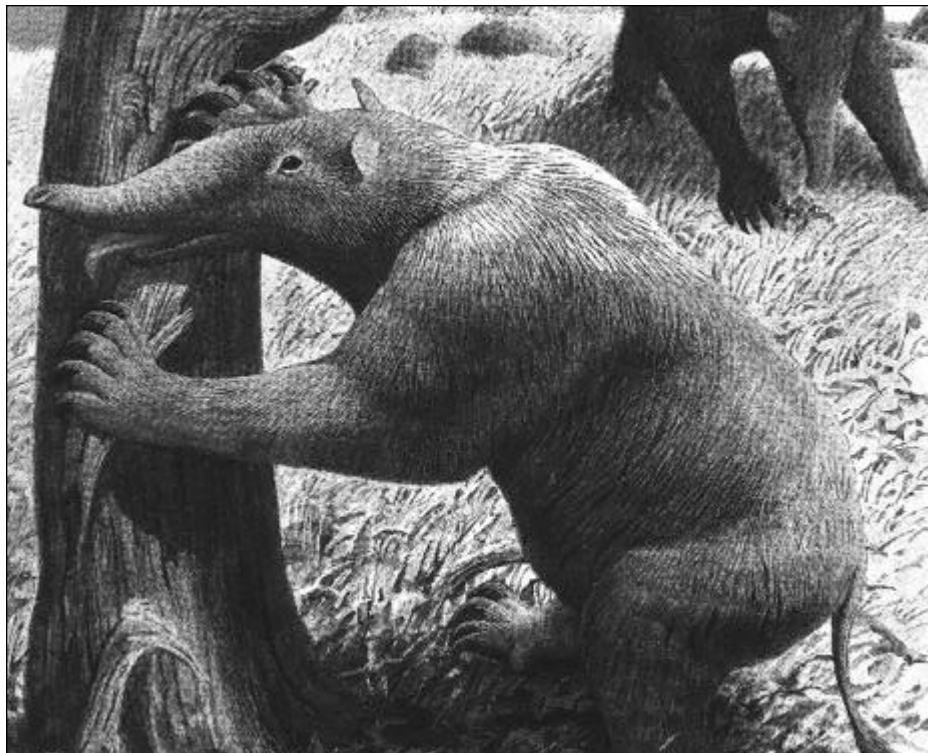
IS THE MACQUARIE RIVER BUNYIP STILL LURKING?

So, the bunyip may have survived into recent times and there is a remote possibility that it may still lurk within a 200-kilometre stretch of the Macquarie River between Wellington and Warren and in the Macquarie Marshes in NSW.

The late Jack Mitchell, who ran a garage in Warne Street, Wellington, had settled on a river-frontage property at Dubbo after the Second World War and became interested in the bunyip after several of his neighbours claimed to have observed them. He advertised for information and received dozens of reports between 1947 and 1973 from Aborigines, graziers and tourists, describing the animals sunbaking on the riverbank, swimming against the current and thrashing about in the water.

Following a tradition since 1847, the bunyip once again raised its head above water, perhaps for the last time, to be described as a living member of our unique fauna in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article, this one dated 20 April 1973. Jack Mitchell was quoted as saying:²⁷

"In every case the animal is the same. It swims in the river, makes a fearful noise, has a head like a calf and tremendous strength. Aborigines have told me it flails the water to foam and easily bursts through their fishing nets."



Palorchestes azael, illustrated by Frank Knight.

(Source: *Kadimakara: Extinct Vertebrates of Australia*, Pioneer Design Studio, Victoria, 1985)

Unfortunately, all the maps and reports that Jack collected have gone missing since his passing, and these need to be retrieved if possible to honour the work of this fine gentleman and to increase our knowledge of an Australian icon. Whether the Macquarie River Bunyip was a member of the herbivorous, horse-necked, maned bunyips or the carnivorous, black dog-like bunyips is also unknown. There is the possibility that the black dog-like bunyip was an unclassified native aquatic predator, though there is no record of such an animal in the fossil record.

THE "TRUE" BUNYIP: A MEGAFUNA REMNANT?

If you visit the Australian Museum in Sydney and walk through the Aboriginal cultural display, you can sit within an artificial cave adorned with rock art and listen to the tape-recorded voice of an Aboriginal man talking about his own encounter with a bunyip. He describes the warnings he received from his elders, that the bunyip ambushed prey at the water's edge at dusk, especially when a light wind was blowing. He then describes how he went to the place where the bunyip was known to hunt and observed what he describes as a giant black water rat-like animal.

So, although straying seals were probably responsible for most of the more common black dog-like bunyip sightings, we still have the mystery of the less common, long-necked, maned, tusked, horse-tailed bunyip. This "true bunyip", the bunyip of William Buckley, the Eumeralla River Bunyip near Port Fairy, the *tunatpan* of the Port Phillip district and the *katempai*, *kinpratia* and *tanatbah* of the Murrumbidgee River that William Howell, the earliest cryptozoologist, searched for, is still unidentified.

Unlike the black dog-like bunyip which no doubt fed on fish, was observed to take waterfowl and may even at times have attacked humans, the true bunyip was a shy, herbivorous animal. We know from the few observations that it was a grazing animal that generally left the water only at night. Its two large downward-pointing tusks (no fangs or canines were ever described) identify it as a Diprotodontid (meaning "two front

teeth") marsupial. The descriptions of the animal's body clearly point to only one genus of Diprotodontid. Even the skull of the "foetal" *kinpratia* found on the Murrumbidgee River and examined by the most respected anatomists matches this animal.

Finally, of all the herbivorous megafauna, only one species appears to have avoided the mass extinctions that occurred perhaps as long as 40,000 years ago and was painted by Aboriginal artists on a very few of the caves in the Northern Territory.

Tim Flannery, in the Australian Museum's 1983 book, *Prehistoric Animals of Australia*, states:²⁸

"Perhaps no animal is as suited to have inspired the legend of the bunyip as *Palorchestes azael*. Although a herbivore, it must have been a fearsome sight. The largest of the three known species of the genus *Palorchestes azael* was the size of a bull. Its exceptionally massive forearms were equipped with razor sharp, rapier-like claws up to 12 cm long, and its bizarre

head was crowned with a longish trunk. Surely this sight would have been enough to give any newly arrived Aboriginals second thoughts about settling. And there is little doubt that *Palorchestes azael* and humans were acquainted. In fact, they co-existed in Australia between about 40–20,000 years ago."

In *Riversleigh: The Story of Animals in Ancient Rainforests of Inland Australia* (1991), further details are provided:²⁹

"The Palorchestids are the other half of the Diprotodontid radiation—their weird half-brothers. The Pleistocene and last-surviving species, *Palorchestes azael*, was about the size of a horse. In body shape it resembled no other creature known. It had huge koala-like claws, enormously powerful forelimbs, a long ribbon-like tongue and a large elephantine trunk. Until the skeleton is adequately studied, speculation about what it did for a living will continue. Although we are certain that it was a herbivore, we are not at all certain about the kinds of plants it ate. In contrast to its Diprotodontid cousins, its high-crowned, complex teeth probably could have withstood the abrasive effects of a grass diet, but this simple interpretation feels hollow when its peculiar limbs, claws and trunk are considered."

In *Kadimakara: Extinct Vertebrates of Australia* (1985), further information is given on this most bizarre animal:³⁰

"In 1874 Sir Richard Owen described the first-known specimen of *Palorchestes azael*... The specimen, consisting of the anterior part of the skull...was discovered in the year 1851 by Dr Ludwig Becker in a bed of yellowish sand and clay mixed with very small shells, in the Province of Victoria. The distribution and abundance of *Palorchestes* bones can give some clues, which are useful in reconstructing the ecology and habitat of these animals. Their remains are rare everywhere, indicating that perhaps they were solitary animals. This apparent rarity could have several causes. If one assumes that their rarity as fossils reflects their rarity as live animals, it is probable that they had low rates of reproduction and occupied relatively large territories or home ranges.

"The skeletons of the species of *Palorchestes* are highly unusual. Perhaps their most striking feature is the structure of the front legs... The nature of the articulation of the upper and lower arm bones in *Palorchestes azael* is very unusual and appears to indicate that this joint was immobile, the front legs being permanently locked in a partly flexed position... The finger bones possess large, semi-circular articulations and appear to have been highly mobile, but only in a forwards-backwards direction. In comparison with the forelimb, the hindlimb was delicate... The massive claws must have presented a problem to the species of *Palorchestes*, assuming that they walked on the ground."

So here we have a very large animal with a smallish head, perhaps on a somewhat elongated thick neck, with powerful though

rather immobile forelimbs that were locked at the elbows, claws that almost prevented the animal the ability to move about (though they may have been retractable), and somewhat delicate hindlimbs. This arrangement would appear to hinder a large and heavy animal as it wandered slowly about, looking for food. In a land full of powerfully built marsupial lions that were adapted to prey on big mammals and giant goannas that grew to almost the size and weight of an Allosaurus dinosaur, it is perhaps unlikely that these animals staggered slowly about, ripping up bulbs and roots or the bark and limbs off trees. The almost immobile forelimbs and great claws appear to be adaptations for a very specialised way of life that has nothing to do with walking about or climbing trees.

Now this may be a long shot, but perhaps these adaptations were required for a sedentary aquatic lifestyle where the giant claws and relatively immobile front legs gripped the substrate of sunken logs and rocks whilst the elongated snout and tongue moved about, dragging in vegetation. With the buoyancy provided by water, this heavy beast with delicate hind limbs and immobile front limbs may well have found it easier to move about within swamps and marshes, feeding on reeds and thereby avoiding

the powerful terrestrial predators of the time. With a limited habitat of wetlands, each individual would indeed need a large territory, which it would define with far-carrying bellowing roars. It would be a rare animal with slow, low rates of reproduction.

The probably young *kinepratia* observed in the extensive marshes of the Murrumbidgee in May 1847 was described as "having an awkward shambling gallop and the forequarters of the animal were very large in proportion to the hindquarters", which fits with the descriptions of the fossil marsupial tapir. Such an animal would also fit with William Buckley's

He received dozens of reports between 1947 and 1973 from Aborigines, graziers and tourists, describing the animals sunbaking on the riverbank, swimming against the current and thrashing about in the water.

"very extraordinary amphibious animal, which the natives call Bun-yip, of which I could never see any part except the back, which appeared to be covered with feathers of a dusky-grey colour"—which may well have been the extensive mane that was so frequently described. Perhaps the "elongated neck and head resembling an emu" may have been the trunk of the marsupial tapir extending up into the air as the animal fed on waterside foliage.

The identity of the bunyip has to be addressed. In the past it has been pushed aside with explanations that the Aboriginal people, who had inhabited the land for something like 50,000 years, were a superstitious and ignorant lot who still had not worked out what lived in their own supermarket. European settlers who observed the bunyip were regarded as obviously of the same ilk. Consequently the bunyip has been turned into a children's fairy-tale character.

Perhaps more likely it was a remarkable remnant of Australia's megafauna, a solitary aquatic herbivore on the edge of extinction, surrounded on all sides by predatory humans. With the arrival of Europeans and their cattle competing for forage, the massive habitat destruction with widespread wetland drainage and silting up of the waterways, yet another ancient life form departed this rapidly emptying continent.

Continued on page 85

The Bunyip Mystery

Continued from page 65

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